

# **BELIEVE ME**

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The Evangelical Road  
to Donald Trump

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WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

### Fear in the City on a Hill

On January 11, 1989, in his farewell speech before the nation, President Ronald Reagan expounded on his understanding of American identity:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

It was a powerful and heartfelt message from a popular American president who had always been supportive of the Christian Right's political agenda. During his presidency he regularly used the phrase "shining city on a hill" as a metaphor for American exceptionalism. The reference came straight from Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do

men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16).

Reagan and his speechwriters also knew that "city on a hill" (the president added the word "shining" for greater rhetorical effect) was used in another sacred text of American civil religion—John Winthrop's 1630 lay discourse "A Model of Christian Charity." We don't know whether Winthrop ever actually delivered this speech, but he probably wrote it aboard the *Arbella* as he traveled westward across the Atlantic with persecuted English Puritans seeking new opportunities in North America. When the ship landed in the port of Salem on June 12, 1630, Winthrop officially became governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is doubtful that Reagan knew very much about John Winthrop or the Puritans, but many of his followers on the Christian Right wanted to reclaim the spiritual principles that Winthrop prayed would become the bedrock of his new "city." The idea of the United States as a shining beacon of power, light, and freedom seemed to best explain its divine mission to make the world safe for democracy and its obsession with ending totalitarian regimes abroad. John Winthrop's colony was, of course, hardly an example of "harmony and peace." The doors of the new "city" were seldom "open to anyone." And very little about everyday life in Massachusetts Bay looked like the United States in the 1980s. But it didn't matter: this is how Reagan saw it, and his evangelical followers on the Christian Right saw it the same way.

In his masterful treatment of the use of "City on a Hill" in the history of American rhetoric, historian Richard Gamble reminds us that Winthrop used the phrase to explain the be-

lief that Massachusetts Bay, as a new Israel, enjoyed a special relationship with God. Rather than triumphantly announcing that the colony would be a beacon of light to the rest of the world—a shining model for others to follow—Winthrop’s discourse was more a proclamation that the stakes couldn’t possibly be higher for the new colony. If the colonists did not lead lives of Christian service to God and their fellow believers, or if they failed to make every effort to build the body of Christ through the winning of new converts, the Lord would be displeased. But if they did meet God’s requirements in these areas, he would bless them and their society. Ancient Israel had failed to live up to God’s standards; it was now time for the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay to try to do better. And the stakes were not only divine in nature; Winthrop let them know that the world was watching their North American experiment. If they botched it, they would be a laughingstock. This covenant relationship with a sovereign and all-powerful God gave the Puritans a “heavy weight of responsibility.”<sup>2</sup>

Winthrop did not hesitate to use the fear of God to motivate his charges to fulfill their covenantal responsibilities. The Puritans, of course, knew the problems with such a claim. They knew that “the church was transcendent and universal, drawn from every nation and language, and not provincial.” Yet, contrary to traditional Calvinist theology, Winthrop made it clear in “A Model of Christian Charity” that when the Puritans landed in Massachusetts, God’s “chosen people and Promised Land became earthly.” The result, according to Gamble, was a “civil religion at odds with a Christian understanding of the church.”<sup>3</sup>

On the surface, Winthrop’s efforts to put the fear of God into the settlers of Massachusetts was very close to what the Bible teaches about fear. In the preceding chapter we saw that

the only appropriate kind of fear for Christians is the fear of a holy and righteous God, who will one day judge his creation. The Puritans understood this kind of fear better than most. But when such appeals to the fear of God were used to sustain a rightly ordered society, they inevitably led the Puritans down some destructive paths, especially destructive for those who claimed the name of Christ and their adherence to New Testament faith.

The Bible was indispensable to the maintenance of Winthrop’s vision. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay were people who had the freedom to read the Bible for themselves; yet they were required by their society to interpret it in the correct way. The Puritans used the word “orthodoxy” to describe the proper interpretation of Scripture and the theology that emanated from it. Massachusetts Bay would be a godly commonwealth where Puritan orthodoxy informed the legal code and where the line between church and state was very thin. The defense of orthodoxy was directly linked to the keeping of the covenant and, consequently, the survival of the city on a hill.

Yet this special covenant with God was not easy to keep for Calvinists, with their robust view of human depravity. In fact, the spiritual decline of the colony probably began before the *Arbella* arrived on New England’s shores.<sup>4</sup> If we listen to today’s conservative evangelical politicians and pseudo-historians, Massachusetts Bay was a place where the seeds of a great Christian nation were planted and grown: it was a community in which religious liberty was born and American exceptionalism was nourished. But actually the story of Massachusetts Bay is the story of a group of devoted Puritans desperate to preserve a Christian civilization that would never be able to measure up to their own standards of success, or to the definition of what it meant to be Christian. It is the story of

a group of Bible-believers who lived in fear of what a wrathful God might do to them if they failed to keep their society pure. They were thus remarkably willing to believe that their society was in a constant state of decline. This was arguably the first American evangelical fear.

The demands of the covenant made the Puritans anxious about every moral failure—personal and collective—that they were able to diagnose. Puritan magistrates and clergy spent most of the seventeenth century complaining about profane activities that triggered God's displeasure. The list of social sins was long: it included disorderly speech, crime, idleness, contempt for authority, intemperance, gambling, and adultery.<sup>5</sup> Educated ministers worried that orthodoxy did not always trickle down to the people who sat in their pews. Historians have shown that those living in that colony, even church members who claimed to have had a conversion experience, practiced a mixture of Christianity, magic, and other folk practices.<sup>6</sup>

Members of Massachusetts society who posed serious threats to orthodoxy were removed from the colony. Some were even executed. Anne Hutchinson, for example, accused clergymen of teaching salvation by works (a "covenant of works") and claimed to receive direct revelation from God. The fact that she taught theology to men in a way that was "not fitting" for her sex did not help her case in this patriarchal society. Hutchinson's courageous efforts to follow her conscience on religious matters resulted in her banishment from the colony. Members of the radical sect called the Society of Friends (Quakers), with their aggressive proselytizing and their claim that God spoke to them directly, posed an even graver threat to the social order of the city on a hill. Between 1659 and 1661, four Quakers—the so-called "Boston martyrs"—

were executed for their religious beliefs. Unlike other British colonial experiments in North America, such as Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay allowed their fear of religious diversity and their dogged defense of one specific reading of the Bible to lead them, ironically, toward intolerance.

Puritan fears were also on display in their relationship with the Native Americans who lived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Conflict with Indians on the frontier was common in seventeenth-century New England. Some ministers believed that Indians represented the most concrete example of Satan's efforts to destroy the city on a hill. According to this line of thinking, the century's two major Indian wars—the Pequot War in 1637 and King Philip's War in 1676—were punishments from God for the Puritans' failure to uphold their end of the covenant. Frontier missionaries, such as John Eliot and Daniel Gookin, established communities of "praying Indians," but their efforts drew little attention from the powerful clergy who presided over the colony's most influential churches. In fact, the evangelization of Indians often exacerbated already existing Puritan fears about Native Americans. When missionaries tried to convince their fellow Puritans to accept Indian converts as part of the religious and social life of the Bay Colony, or to trust them as political and military allies, their efforts did not get very far. The integration of Christian Indians into Massachusetts society was not an option that many Puritans were willing to entertain. As Puritans became more acquainted with Indian converts in their midst, the racial differences between the groups intensified in spite of the fact that both European and Native Puritans shared an orthodox belief and saw the necessity of godly living.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, Winthrop's city on a

hill seemed to be under threat. Massachusetts' participation in the ever-expanding British transatlantic marketplace brought materialism and economic acquisitiveness to the colony. It also brought "strangers," who had no stake in the religious ideas at the heart of this colonial experiment. These strangers preferred the rough culture of the port towns and their taverns over the spiritual life offered to them in the meetinghouse. They seemed to be motivated less by a commitment to the common good (as the Puritans understood it) and more by the individualism and greed associated with commercialism. The number of religious conversions in the colony had declined to such an extent that the magistrates and clergy needed to come up with new ways of defining church membership that did not require members to testify to a born-again experience. As Massachusetts opened up to the rest of the English-speaking world, talk of a covenant relationship between the colony and God became more confined to Sunday morning services. In 1684, the English government revoked the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, effectively ending its legal power to shape its own destiny as a godly commonwealth.

Puritan fears about the moral and spiritual decline of their society reached a zenith in 1692. In that year 160 men and women in the colony were accused of witchcraft. Nineteen people were executed by public hanging, and one was pressed to death. The Puritan belief in Satan, demons, and witches only partly explains what happened in Salem and the surrounding towns. New England had seen its share of witch trials over the decades, but the region had not experienced such a scare in more than thirty years. This fact has prompted historians to ask questions about the timing of the witchcraft accusations and why they spread so quickly. Historians of both colonial America and early modern Europe have

argued convincingly that witch trials were means by which religious and political leaders dealt with men and women who posed a threat to traditional Christian societies. Many of the Massachusetts residents who were accused by their neighbors of witchcraft—and the clergy and prominent lay leaders who supported those accusations—believed that the outbreak of malfeasance was a clear sign that Satan was trying to deal a deathblow to their godly commonwealth. During the trials, Salem minister Samuel Parris preached from Revelation 17:14, reminding his congregation that "the Devil and his instruments will be warring against Christ and his followers." He continued: "There are but two parties in the world . . . the Lamb and his followers, and the dragon and his followers. . . . Everyone is on one side or another." This would not be the last time we would witness this kind of dualistic thinking or sense of theological certainty. In fact, as we shall see, it would become a hallmark of evangelical thinking.<sup>8</sup>

The Salem witch trials were a disaster for Massachusetts Bay. Despite warnings from some of the colony's most prominent ministers, the magistrates used spectral evidence (dreams or visions of witches visiting people in the night and causing or threatening harm) to convict the accused witches and sentence them to death. The speed with which the witchcraft allegations spread throughout northeast New England is evidence of how Christians allowed fear, based on sketchy evidence, to consume them.

After the hysteria came to an end, many of the participants in the witch trials looked back with embarrassment. Some asked for forgiveness or made public testimonies of repentance. In 1695, Thomas Maule, a member of the Society of Friends in Salem, wrote a tract denouncing his Puritan neighbors for their un-Christian behavior during the

witchcraft frenzy. In *Truth Held Forth and Maintained*, Maule declares: "For it were best that one hundred witches should live, than that one person be put to death for a Witch, which is not a witch."<sup>9</sup> Maule's words were a stinging and prophetic critique of the Salem witch trials; they also landed him in jail for twelve months.

### The Catholic Menace

There were few Catholics in early New England, but that did not prevent the Puritans from fearing them and what they could do to the eternal souls of their loved ones. As descendants of the Protestant Reformation, Puritans were convinced by their reading of the Bible that Catholicism was a false religion. New England clergy equated "popery" with the "great whore of Babylon" who was prophesied in the book of Revelation. The Puritans believed that Protestantism, when compared to Roman Catholicism, was a religion of liberty; Protestants could read the Bible for themselves in the vernacular language; they were free from the "superstitions" of the Catholic mass; and they were not restricted in their worship by the sacramental and liturgical trappings that held ordinary Catholics in a state of spiritual tyranny. Finally, Protestants believed that salvation came through faith alone and not by good works. They were sure that Catholics would spend eternity in hell.

Throughout the colonial era, thousands of Catholics—both European and converted Native Americans—lived to the north of the British colonies in the settlement of New France. Puritans knew that the Jesuit clergy of these Catholic settlements regularly outdid them in their attempts to convert the

Indians. The eighteenth-century wars between the British colonists and the French for control of North American territory were, in the minds of New Englanders, nothing short of religious wars. They lived under constant threat of raids on Puritan villages that were carried out by Indians allied with the French. An entire genre of literature known as "captivity narratives," written by men and women who had been seized by Indians during these attacks, described Jesuit attempts to convert Puritan captives to Catholicism. In 1704, during Queen Anne's War, Mohawk Indians raided the frontier Massachusetts town of Deerfield. They murdered fifty inhabitants of the village and kidnapped over one hundred more. One of the Puritans taken was Eunice Williams, the daughter of Rev. John Williams, the town's Puritan minister. Perhaps the most revealing part of the Williams family story, as told by historian John Demos, is that Rev. Williams, while certainly concerned about his daughter's physical safety, was more fearful about the eternal state of her soul after he learned that she had converted to Catholicism.<sup>10</sup>